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ABSTRACT

The issue of whether high school and postsecondary students with native language communication deficits can succeed in second language study is discussed. It is noted that before World War II, language education was considered primarily a good form of mental discipline. More recent trends toward "relevant" language learning have emphasized development of generalized cognitive, conceptualization, and critical thinking skills. Arguments against second language instruction for students with communication deficits include the positions that: (1) students with language disabilities can not be expected to manage more than adequate language usage; (2) learning disabled students will lose whatever gains they may have in native language proficiency when they study a second language; (3) special-needs students will transfer native language problems to the second language; and (4) learning disabled students may enroll in a college not requiring foreign language study on the high school transcript. However, it is proposed that these arguments can all be rebutted by current research and observation, and that if the student has a strong will to learn a suitable second language, the educator has a responsibility to find a way to attain that objective. A 15-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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Curriculum Issue:

Second Language Acquisition for Special Needs Students

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Second Language Acquisition for Special Needs Students

Issues in the study of foreign language are numerous and multi-faceted. The issue to be explored here is separate from the currently publicized national controversies regarding bilingual education (teaching students in their native language while they learn English) and "U.S. English," (a group created by former California Senator S.I. Hayakawa in 1983 seeking state constitution amendments recognizing English as the "official language"). It is difficult to find any literature arguing against the study of foreign language while significant reasons advocating its inclusion in the curriculum range from literacy in the classics to competition for global economic leverage and intercultural understanding.

In most schools beyond the elementary level, mandatory study of a foreign language raises the issue most affecting my work as a special educator. Is it possible for adolescents/young adults with communication deficit/s in their native language to succeed in the study and acquisition of a second language? My concern is for the at-risk students at the secondary and post-secondary level, the high school students with whom I now work and who have aspirations of going on to institutions of higher learning. The literature does not seem to distinguish the problems of high schoolers from college students so they will be treated as one group and referred to as either adolescents or young adults. It should also be noted that not all learning problems are perceptual even though similar symptoms make it difficult to distinguish their etiology without diagnostic analysis.

Prior to World War II, the study of foreign language in United States schools was considered primarily a good mental discipline. Our extreme isolationism came to an earth-shaking halt with that war and the U.S. took its place as a world power. It soon became apparent that foreign language study had another purpose - communication - and goaded still further by Sputnik, catching up was attempted with crash language courses. These were usually taught by the audio-lingual method (ALM), by the cognitive code method - understanding the structure of the language to develop proficiency, and/or by rote drill (Met; Maes). These methods left their students linguistically tongue-tied, unable to communicate competently. In the late 1960's and early 1970's, the campus rebels' quest for "relevant curriculum" caused many colleges to drop foreign language requirements. In situations where the instruction was

inadequate, this may have been just as well. The tide turned again in 1979 when President Carter's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies proclaimed "...Americans' incompetence in the field 'scandalous' " (Bennett). This public condemnation at a time when international trade was very active inspired the return of foreign language study to "relevant" status (Bennett; Larson). "The concern for relevance is reflected in methodological innovations,...new ideas for testing real-world communication skills," and recognition of "...cognitive styles, learning strategies, and personality characteristics of individual learners..." and their relationships to successful, responsive instruction (Omaggio). This revamping of strategies and preparation has been enabling more and more second language learners to develop cognitive skills, conceptualizing skills, and critical thinking skills which they will remember and continue to apply to their foreign language study and other situations with great satisfaction (Woodruff).

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Educators and parents who believe that students with communications deficit/s will not be able to succeed in the study of a second language base their position on a variety of reasons which can be rebutted by current research and careful observation.

POSITION: Students with language disabilities cannot be expected to do more than manage adequate usage of their native language.

REBUTTAL: Not enough research has been done to ascertain how proficiency in the native language is related to development of the second language (Corey; Fitzgerald). It has been shown, however, that learning to communicate functionally in a "...second language is not related to intelligence as measured by standardized tests" (Swain). There are, in fact, numerous instances of perceptual learning problems that have shown up for the very first time as adults undertake the study of a second language at the college level. Certainly, these otherwise successful students should not be barred from foreign language study but individually helped to achieve their goals. Whatever inhibited primary language communication for previously diagnosed special needs students, may have been

overcome by strategies and techniques that are applicable to foreign language study. Therefore, these students with special needs in learning to communicate should be offered individualized instruction in a second language, thereby affording them the opportunity to fulfill their potential to acquire a foreign language and its associated benefits.

POSITION: Learning disabled students will lose whatever gains they have made in their native language when the study of a second language is undertaken.

REBUTTAL: Research indicates that the study of a second language improves the skills of the native language. Often, it is the analysis of another language or culture that clarifies distinctions in the primary language or culture that heretofore have not been understood, recognized, or taken for granted (Larson). If needed, appropriate strategies or compensatory techniques may be used to learn a second language. Should a student display a tendency to mix the primary and secondary languages, it need not be a sign of confusion, but rather an indication of a creative strategy being used to solve a vocabulary or syntax problem.

POSITION: Special needs students will transfer problems from native language to a second language.

REBUTTAL: Some of the errors made in the acquisition of a second language are similar to the errors made by native speakers (learning disabled or not) when acquiring their primary language skills. Youngsters misusing pronouns or lacking noun-verb agreement are not promptly declared "learning disabled" if they ask, "Can me have a cookie?" And since when are students forbidden to make mistakes? Developmental errors should be handled without embarrassing the student and used, when possible, as a teaching device. Thus the student may profit from errors and continue to persevere in the pursuit of proficiency (Anderson).

POSITION: Learning disabled students my enroll in a college not requiring foreign language study on the high school transcript.

REBUTTAL: More and more secondary schools are requiring second language study. Nationally, twenty-nine percent of high schoolers were enrolled in foreign language classes, a thirty-eight percent increase since 1978. North Carolina's legislature has forged ahead with its mandate that foreign language instruction be offered from kindergarten through high school by 1992 (Larson). "Misconceptions concerning realistic post-secondary school goals for learning disabled students have contributed to the lack of meaningful applied research aimed at facilitating higher education for these students" (Gajar). A 1983 survey of fifty-three colleges and universities revealed that eighty-nine percent of them require foreign language study for at least some majors. Consequently, secondary school counselors must now be . aware that second language achievement at higher levels is becoming essential. Currently, Pennsylvania State University derives information from careful diagnosis and assessment of a learning problem and uses it to develop an individualized intervention program, thus enabling the troubled student to be successful in the study of a second language. Consideration is also given to which second language is best suited to the student's learning style (Marshall; Myer; Ohme). Some schools may waive the foreign language requirement for a special needs student but this is not easily accomplished. Schools, such as Ohio State University, Boston University, and the University of Pennsylvania, judge petitions to waive foreign language courses by an in-depth review of the individual's foreign language background. Ohio State offers the successful petitioner a seminar, "Learning to Learn," aimed directly at development of metacognitive strategies. Boston offers its petitioners a series of courses: "Language Learning," which focuses more on the written than the spoken word, the basics of linguistic structure, and issues pertinent to French or Spanish; "Development of Reading Skills;" and "Development of Writing Skills." Pennsylvania students whose foreign language requirements have been waived, take courses providing an understanding of foreign

languages and cultures and an introduction to foreign literatures.

In London, beginning adult students of foreign language at International House are given pre-beginner sessions designed to show students what to expect in terms of the nature of language and the methodology to be used to teach it. From this experience, students derive improved study skills, enjoy enhanced self-confidence, and experience increased motiva quantity," apprehension is reduced and learning is accelerated. They produce good oral language and communicate meaningfully with ease. Sessions based on this model might be well advised for pre-freshmen with special needs in language. In fact, anyone without previous experience in foreign language study would benefit from such preview classes as a foundation for enhanced progress toward second language proficiency.

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In short, "Where there's a will, there's a way." If the student brings a good, strong **will** to learn a suitable second language to a knowledgeable, energetic, innovative educator, the **way** should be found. It is well worth the effort because the benefits are many and longlasting. Even at a beginning level, students will become aware that foreign language study provides more than practical skills. It can be a way of understanding ourselves and others, "...a rich source of delight," as Thomas Jefferson put it. It should not be denied to any willing learner, and those with special needs may have more to gain from the acquisition of a second language than those for whom a second language is easily acquired.

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